

Some Experiences of Lord Syfret.

BY ARABELLA KENEALY.

I.—THE HAUNTED CHILD.

ILLUSTRATED BY W. BAYES.

AT forty I had exhausted all the resources of civilised life. I had health, wealth, and position, yet I knew that unless I could devise some new expedient for passing time suicide would be my last sensation. As to whether suicide were justifiable or not I did not concern myself. I was bored and I did not purpose to continue being bored. Exploring my mental reserves I lighted upon a vein which, suitably worked, might profit me. I set about working it. So far I have done so successfully. Once more life is tolerable, occasionally exhilarating.

The vein is an insatiable and absorbing interest—curiosity—call it what you will—in other people's lives. Fiction has no charm for me. I am always conscious that its personages are but printer's ink. And I like my pages of story wet with the ink of life. I meet a man or a woman whose appearance or conditions stir me. By the expenditure of a little ingenuity, some trouble, and more or less hard cash, that person's story lies in my hand. Aided by a staff of well-drilled agents, whose duty I have made it to shadow in one capacity or another the fortunes of such persons as roused my curiosity—I am enabled to read their stories like a book. And, I tell you, few romances approach in interest some of the realities I have thus been able to trace. My right to peer into my fellows' lives may be denied. I myself have never considered the question. To do so amuses me. That is sanction enough for my morality.

It has occurred to me to record a few of the stories I have chanced upon. That thus set down they will interest others as they interested me who watched them as they were wrought in the forge of life I do not pretend. Yet they may serve for entertainment. As already stated my concern is purely psychological, or, if you prefer a simpler term, impertinent curiosity. With the right or wrong of things I do not meddle.

Only in exceptional cases do I even trouble to put the law on the track of murder, though, in the course of their activities on my behalf, my agents should witness the commission of such a crime. For my part I prefer the delinquent to escape, that I may find, as I do, penalty closing in on him as an indirect consequence of his action, rather than that it shall take the clumsy form we dignify by the title of justice. Far crueller, subtler, and a hundredfold more fitting to a particular crime are the methods whereby time, character and circumstance enmesh the criminal. Expedient it may be to rid ourselves of the confessedly vicious. But the Powers which are moulding us to ends our finite minds have so far failed to grasp are neither assisted in their ultimate objects nor appeased in their far-reaching wrath—so to put it—by our crude expedients. The long arm of development which encompasses the human family and places effect in the unerring train of cause will find the murderer, many years it may be after we have done with him, but find him it will as inevitably as the impulse given to pool by pebble laps the shore.

How can it reach him after death? you ask. Death is but change of identity. Entities in the school of evolution pass through myriad lives in training for eternity, and the ill acts of one existence may not find expiation until a later one. A theory, you say. A theory, I admit. But I ask you for another that shall equally explain the inexplicabilities of human life. I have a story illustrative of my theory. Read into it any other interpretation that you will, and judge if it apply as mine does.

* * * *

In a cottage on one of my estates a gamekeeper lived, some ten years since, with his young and pretty wife. He was middle-aged and morose, considering, as does many another, that the one cardinal virtue he practised—in his case that of

honesty—absolved him from the obligation of practising any of the minor amenities and amiabilities of life. Nobody could imagine by what sorcery or fortuitous concomitance of accidents he had persuaded pretty Polly Penrose to mate with him. He had saved a certain

so they let the matter drop. Cooper was but one of Polly's "whimsies."

It is probable I should never have concerned myself with Polly's affairs had I not one day come upon her crying her eyes out in a wood. On seeing me, she blushed and stole away. Matters just



"STRUCK HIM WITH THE BUTT-END OF HIS GUN"

sum of money, for to other unlovable qualities he added that of screw. Polly had swains better circumstanced than he, however, so that this offered no solution of the problem. The village wondered, chattered, and finally decided that "you could niver calculate on what gells do, for they're chock full o' whimsies," and

then were dull with me. I had no other case on hand; and, without anticipating much result, idly determined to trace the cause of Polly's tears. I had, among my agents, a girl of about her age and temperament; and, putting her to lodge in the village, she soon made Polly's acquaintance. It came out then that

Polly had married for pique. There was a certain stalwart sweetheart of hers—another of my keepers—of whom she was fond, but he rousing her jealousy by attention to a rival, in a fit of temper she accepted Cooper. To make a long story short—for this is but a preface—Polly and her lover made it up again too late, for Polly was then Mrs. Cooper.

Polly was a good girl, and I do not believe Cooper had any substantial reason for complaint, as she saw Dell but rarely. But she grew pallid and depressed. Occasionally she was seen with Dell. The circumstances reaching Cooper's ears, with doubtless some embellishment, there was trouble in the cottage. Cooper even went so far as to strike her. In her fear and agitation—the poor girl was soon to be a mother—she fled to Dell.

Cooper, following, found her in a shed near the latter's cottage. From words the men passed to blows, and eventually Dell struck Cooper over the head with the butt-end of his gun. Whether he meant murder or not, who can say? but a long acquaintance with the poor fellow makes me confident the impulse was momentary and uncontrollable. But murder it turned out. Cooper's skull was fractured and he died in a few hours.

Dell made no effort to escape. His one fear seems to have been for Polly. He remained with her in the cottage, soothing and re-assuring her till he was handcuffed and taken to gaol. I did all I could on his behalf. I even had the gaol-lock tampered with. I had an instinct of what would happen should his case come to trial, and hanging was the last death for the fine young fellow he was.

I was a magistrate and could easily have contrived his escape. But the blockhead would not take his liberty. He could not now marry Polly he said, and he did not care for life.

A thick-skulled jury, directed by a judge who on the Bench was as keen a stickler for the proprieties as off the Bench he was obtuse about them, put the worst—and, I believe, the false—construction on Dell's and Polly's fondness. He was convicted of murder, and sentenced to death. Under the circumstances, it was a monstrous sentence. There had been assuredly no premedita-

tion, and his provocation was great. We petitioned the Home Secretary; we petitioned Parliament. We might have spared our signatures and ink. When Dell's time came he was hanged. And now comes the gist of my story.

I filled up the places left vacant by Dell and his victim, putting in two keepers from a distance. There was a strong local feeling against the occupation of either of the cottages. Presently it was rumoured that the shed wherein the murder had occurred was haunted. But the new keepers, unaffected by the tragedy which to them was merely hearsay, pooh-poohed the rumour.

Curiously enough, the wife of one turned out to be a distant cousin of Dell's. She was a buxom person, strong-nerved and braced with common sense. She scoffed at ghost-talk.

"Depend on it, your lordship," she said once to me, "there's a deal more to be afear't on in the livin' than the dead; and as long as it's noboddy comin' to meddle wi' Johnson's belongings, why, let the poor things, if things there be, come an' go as it pleases 'em."

I mention this to free my story from an implication to which it may presently seem open. Mrs. Johnson was as unimpressible a woman as could be, and was as little affected by the talk of ghosts as she would have been by their apparition.

Now the ghost which was said to walk and to have been seen by more than one person, was not, as I have gathered is the way of ghosts, the shade of the murdered man, but that of his murderer. All who had caught the fleeting glimpse—which is as much as the ghost-seer generally permits himself—agreed that the apparition haunting the wood-shed was Dell's. Round and round in a restricted circle, skirting the space whereon a ghastly form had stretched, the ghost was seen to pass. Its head was bent, its face leaned down. Its eyes stared, frozen with horror. Moans and sighs of the direst distress were heard to issue from the shed. But the man from whom I had a description, a tramp who, unwitting of its reputation, had stolen there one rainy evening for the purpose of a night's lodging, described the thing he saw as mute and noiseless, making a dumb and ceaseless circuit of the floor. To him the circuit taken by the apparition was but a stretch of dust.

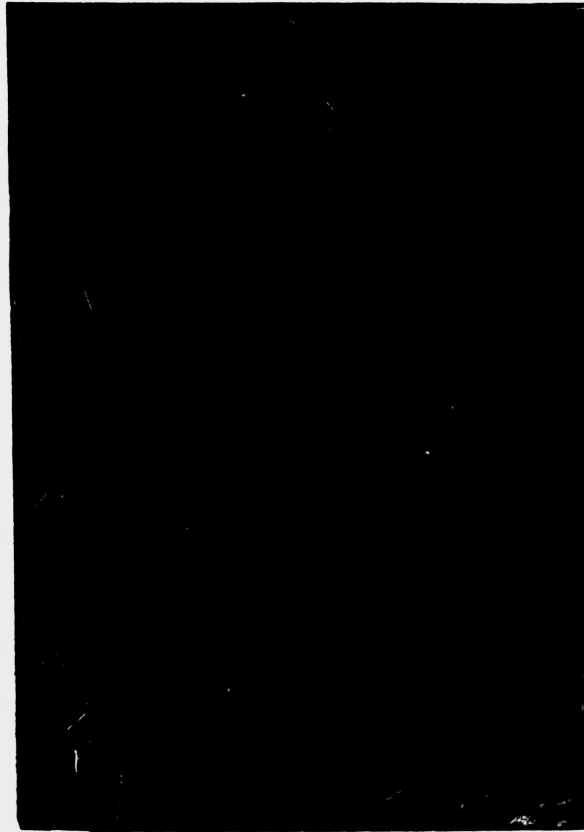
boards, but the stark horror in the shadow's eyes told of some ghastly visibility.

The man was green with fright. He had lain there staring nearly all the night, afraid to move, afraid almost to breathe, lest he should turn the horror of the eyes upon himself. He painted in the vivid speech of panic the curious effect of morning: how as the light grew, it left less and still less of the apparition visible, how from being something luminous against the darkness it passed into a thin translucent shade against the light, how the outlines slowly faded and the form was lost, yet he could see it whirling like a grey smoke round and round six feet of floor. When the sun came up it slipped away as mist slips into air. In the morning when the man was brought to me he was piebald. The hair and beard of one side had gone white in the night.

A time came when the ghost was seen no more. The sighs and moanings ceased. Still the shed lost no whit of its evil reputation.

A year after the Johnsons' advent to the cottage, a child was born to them. They had already several children—buxom, cherry-cheeked youngsters, after the type of their mother. This child was different. The difference did not show at first. The infant was as other infants—a mere homogeneous mass of red-pink flesh, with the slate-grey eyes of its kind; eyes that deluded mothers call dark or light according to their fancy, for the rest of the world perceives that not until long after seeing the light do babies' eyes take on the shade they eventually keep. But this infant, though like enough to others, differed from them in one particular—it had a large blood-red spot in the palm of its right hand. The doctor pronounced the spot merely accidental and ephemeral; it would disappear before the week was out. Subsequently he modified his opinion. It was a variety of *nævus*, but he considered that it did not call for operation. The child would outgrow it. But the

doctor was wrong. As the palm grew the blood-spot grew, and its colour did not wane. Presently, when the child assumed with age the waxen whiteness that afterwards characterised it, the spot had a curious effect of focussing all the blood in its body. As the baby slowly evolved an individuality out of



"AFRAID TO MOVE"

its pink homogeneousness, it was seen to differ singularly from the rest of the Johnson children. In the place of their fair chubbiness, it was pallid and dark. Its brows were strongly and sombrely marked, and its eyes gathered slowly a look of weird horror. It cried rarely or never. Nor did it smile. It sat staring before it with a fixed expression and a blood-red palm upturned.

A child is born with its hands knotted into fists, fists which for months are opened with difficulty. It is an instinctive action of grasping the life before it. A man or woman dies with the palms extended. The life has been wrought and is rendered up. The Johnson baby never curled its fists as normal babies do. It held its palms limply open with the

blood-red spot for all to see. The villagers talked as villagers always talk of something out of the common. They drew conclusions—the short-sighted conclusions of their kind. They pronounced the child's uncanniness a judgment on the mother for her scoffing.

"It don't do to make light o' they things," they croaked. They predicted the baby's early death. The child attracted my attention from the first. I got a curious impression about it. Its face had a familiar look. The horror in its eyes reminded me of something. It was not until later that I knew of what.

I had a vacant cottage near. In it I installed an elderly woman of observant faculty. She made friends with the mother, and having leisure took the infant frequently off her hands. By her means I am able to relate what happened. So soon as it showed signs of intelligence—signs such as those used to children interpret, while to others they are still meaningless—the Johnson baby developed interest in the haunted shed—now, it must be remembered, no longer haunted.

The moment it was taken out of doors its eyes turned in the direction of the building, that stood but a short distance from the cottage. It was restless and wayward out of sight of it, and would weary and fret with inarticulate demands until carried whence it could see it. So soon as it was able, it would drag itself along the floor and out at the door to sit there with hands on tiny knees, staring with fascinated looks.

Before it was ten months old, it was found, having crept across the patch of ground between the house and shed, tired with its efforts, lying extended on the grass, its waxen face turned solemnly upon the building, its eyes fixed. Later it managed to escape attention long enough to reach the shed, shuffling along as infants do on hands and legs. It was discovered crouching at the open door, its head dropt till its chin rested almost in its lap, its pupils wide upon some portion of the floor. An illness followed, and for some weeks the child's life was in danger. It had taken a chill, the doctor said. Even then, though weakened with fever, the poor little creature left for a moment, would struggle feebly to the foot of the bed, whence through the window a corner of the shed was visible. There it would be

found staring with grave, frightened eyes.

When strong enough to be up again it made always for the window, to stand there with its face pressed close against the glass. The doctor diagnosed the child as weak-minded, but I cannot say the term at all described the terrible intelligence that looked out of its eyes. The women shook their heads.

"It knows too much, poor little dear," they said. "There isn't nothing that's said it don't know. If anybody could find out what it's always askin' in its eyes per'aps it ud be able to die quiet, for anybody can see it ain't long for this world."

Mrs. Johnson paid but little heed to all the talk.

"I don't see anything much different in the child from other children," she said impatiently, "only it don't thrive. I expect it 'll be stronger on its legs when it's got its teeth and can take a bit o' meat wi' the rest of us."

But the child grew no stronger on its legs, nor did it grow the least bit less unlike the chubby-cheeked Johnson brood. It seemed to have no wish to walk. It was a patient little thing, and when planted by a chair would stand there; but so soon as attention was drawn from it, it would drop to its hands and knees again, and creep to the door.

Johnson made a little fence, to keep it from straying; but it developed a weird sagacity for evading this, wriggling through or clambering over, or escaping by a back door. Then, if not intercepted, it would work its way across the patch of ground till it reached the doorway of the shed. There it would sit for hours together, straining its eyes upon some portion of the floor—always the same portion. Rain, snow, or wind it minded not. Frequently it was found squatted there in the entrance, wet to the skin, with a heavy rain beating on it, to all appearance unconscious of its wet and chilled condition—its gaze and powers magnetised. It took but little food, and was a puny, miserable morsel. Such food as it took, it took mechanically and in obedience to its mother. It never seemed hungry, or interested, as babies are interested, in the sweet and edible.

It did not play, nor did it seem to have a notion of the use of toys. A doll or painted ball it would turn seriously over in its fingers, then lay aside with a



"THE VILLAGERS WHISPERED THAT IT HAD THE EVIL EYE"

quaint solemnity as though it had weightier matters on hand. Its only comfort was its thumb, which it sucked gravely, and with a thoughtful sobriety as of an old man smoking a pipe. It had no fear of darkness. It was found in the shed at dead of night, having scrambled stealthily from its cot, down the cottage stairs and out at the door. Sometimes it sat at a distance gazing spell-bound. Generally it spent its time shuffling round and round a certain area of floor dragging itself laboriously on hands and knees as one doing penance.

The villagers grew scared at it, and whispered that it had the evil eye. They would turn back to avoid passing it in the road. I have had boys thrashed for stoning it. Even its matter-of-fact mother came to have a horror of it, with its weird ways and terrible eyes. Yet it was patient and gave no trouble, so long as it were permitted to be in the shed. Its limbs, they told me, were raw and red, from the continuous rub of the boards against its baby skin. And the nails of toes and fingers were worn to the quick with its ceaseless clambering.

That the child suffered mentally, I cannot say. Possibly not. It seemed to gather satisfaction from its treadmill labours, though there was always that horror in its eyes.

"Perhaps your lordship would be pleased to come and see it," my agent suggested one day, when I chanced to pass the Johnson cottage. "Mrs. Johnson has gone into the village. The baby was shut in, but it has got out somehow and crept to the shed."

I followed her. We went quietly; but I doubt if the child would have heard in any case, so absorbed was it. We watched it through the window. Its frock and feet were stained with the soil over which it had dragged itself. The day was damp, and mud clung about its hands. But it minded nothing. In the half-sitting, half-kneeling posture of creeping children it dragged itself sideways round and round a circle encompassing some six feet of floor—six feet in length and from three to four in breadth. Dust lay thick on the boards, so that the circuit made by it was clearly traced. It went always over the same ground, marking a curious zig-zagged shape. Round and round, now up, now down, tracing the same inexplicable course it plodded, a thick dust

rising on either side to the infantile flop of its skirts.

Its face was bent towards the centre of the trail it followed, its eyes rivetted. Sweat stood moist on its skin, and in the moisture dust clung, giving it a dark, unearthly look. It sighed and panted at its task. Every now and again it would cease from utter weariness and, sitting up, would lift its dusty frock and wipe its lips. After a minute it resumed its treadmill round. I went in. It lifted its awed and grimy countenance and looked at me with that terrible intelligence. Then it resumed its dusty way.

I took it up and sat it on a pile of wood. It whined and fretted, stretching its arms to the shape on the floor. I left it where it was, and, crossing the shed, stood looking down upon the figure it had traced. I could make nothing of it. It was an irregular oblong of indefinite form, wider to one end, narrowing to the other. A grim thought struck me that it resembled a coffin. I was interested. What was the meaning of it all? What, if anything, did those weird eyes see? I bade the woman bring some cake or sweets. She came back with an orange.

"He'll do anything for an orange," she said.

I made her take the child and set him on the floor to one side of the figure. I placed myself on the other. The oblong was between us at its widest part. I held the orange up, and beckoned him.

"Go get it!" the woman urged.

He gazed at me questioningly, as though probing my intention. His eyes rested on the orange; then something that in another child would have been a smile floated over his face. He set out, creeping toward me. I watched him intently. Would he cross that circle? He came on, shuffling slowly, raising a cloud of dust. But when he reached the further limit of the oblong, he stopped short. He turned his face down, and bent his looks on something that he seemed to see within the circle—something about the level of his eyes.

I stamped my foot and called to him. He looked up curiously but did not move. I held the orange toward him. He stretched his hand out, raising it carefully as though to prevent it coming into contact with the something that was there.

"Come," I said.

His eyes again levelled. They travelled slowly over that I could not see. Then he looked up at me, dully reproachful.

"Come," I called again, tossing the orange.

He shook his head with a grave, old-man solemnity. I stamped my foot once more.

"Come," I insisted.

His lips quivered feebly. Tears came into his eyes. Suddenly his features quickened with a new sagacity. He swerved aside and came creeping to me

Thank goodness she was in time! I looked down into his face. Poor little wretch! There was all the dumb agony of a ripe intelligence frozen on it. He clung to me strenuously, turning his rigid looks from that over which we stood. I gave him to her.

"Take him away. Get the poor little wretch out into the air. Give him the orange. Give him anything—only drive that look from his face." She took him out. He turned a shuddering head over her shoulder seeking



"THE FLOWERS STOOD AROUND HIM
LIKE GENTLE SENTINELS"

round the outer edge of the figure he had traced, bending his looks with an awed avoidance upon that he saw there. I tried a dozen times. But he would not cross the line. He scanned me plaintively. Why did I so torment him?

I took him in my arms. I carried him toward the charmed circle. Looking back I can see that the act was a brutal one, such a brutal one as the curiosity we dignify by the terms intellectual or scientific is frequently guilty of. But the woman stopped me. She caught him out of my arms.

"For heaven's sake, don't, my lord," she gasped, "I did it once. I thought he would have died."

that spot. It was the spot where Cooper had lain. I knew it now. He had lain there stretched full length, and over him Dell had stood with stricken eyes. Heavens! Why had the child those eyes? And why had it been cursed with this terrible vision? Had re-birth come so soon? Were the retributive forces of murder thus expiating in a little child?

I stood looking down at the figure traced in dust. I thrust my stick into it. Did I really feel a dull resistance? I lowered my hand to within some inches of the floor. Was the air really chill? Pshaw! The babe had infected me. It

was but a draught from the door. As I stood my stick slipped from my hold, and sliding stopped between the curves composing the lower end of the oblong. A tree-branch, stirred by the wind, shot its shadow through the doorway immediately across the tracery. In a moment, as a few strokes put to outlines which had had no meaning gather the lines into life, so now the unmeaning tracery took shape. The stick formed a line of demarcation between extended legs, a limb of the shadow-tree lay like an outstretched arm and hand. Even for a moment convulsing features were given to a curve that might have been a face, as a flicker of twigs and fluttering leaves hurried like vanishing pencil marks across the outline. In that moment the murdered body of Cooper was reproduced as I had seen it. I am sufficiently strong-nerved. Yet I admit I turned sick. I picked up my stick and went out.

I knew now that what had been momentarily visible to me was ever before the doomed baby, that to its eyes the murdered man was always there. I felt my hair lift as though an ice-wind swept under my hat.

I had the shed pulled down. I had the ground it covered sown with flowers.

But the spot kept its old fascination for the poor little creature. He could not now drag round it, the way being barred. But he sat for hours tracing with waxen fingers something that for him lay there, something that to us was but space between flower-stalks.

I sent him to the sea, a hundred miles away. In three days his life was despaired of. His impulse in living was gone. He fell into a state of stupor. He revived when brought back. He dragged himself out to the flower-bed, and sat there crooning with a kind of plaintive content, tracing that outline with his pallid hands.

One morning they found him dead there. He had crept from his cot at some time during the night, and had scrambled in the darkness—he never learned to walk—to the old spot. Rain was falling, and he lay on his back with face upturned and wet, his fair hair limp about him. His brows were unbent and tranquil, through his half-unclosed lids at last peace looked. The flowers stood round him like gentle sentinels, their flower-cups full of rain as eyes with tears. For the first time in his life the smile of a child lay over his lips. And the blood-spot in his palm was white as wool.

